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Deconstructing Women's Work

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Picture a server in your head, then picture the owner of the restaurant. Picture a doctor, then picture the nurse. Picture a daycare worker. Picture a CEO. Picture a cosmetologist, then picture an engineer. Which jobs have you, consciously or not, categorized as women's work? Are they less prestigious, Lower-paying? There are no laws in the United States that bar women from pursuing any careers that may interest them, but it is worth considering whether or not social norms have caught up with this goal of equality. Many researchers, writers, and everyday women believe otherwise. In order to dismantle the sexist obstacles, biases, and stigmas that keep our work environments unfair, we must, as a society, encourage diversity and representation, address the stigmas we encounter second-hand, and, perhaps most importantly, unlearn our own prejudices.

One challenge women face as members of the workforce is unequal representation in high-paying job fields. American society increasingly emphasizes the importance of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, known collectively as STEM; related jobs typically come with high wages and status, but women hold a disproportionately low percentage of such jobs. Joan C. Williams examines this phenomenon in her essay "The 5 Biases Pushing Women Out of STEM." Williams believes that men and women do not have inherently different interests or skill levels, but rather that the primary issue is "gender bias in driving women out of science careers." She suggests that prejudice deters many women from entering STEM occupations, and that workplace sexism causes others to exit jobs in the sciences. Women report facing more scrutiny and doubt from interviewers than men; this skepticism follows them into the workplace when they are distrusted or talked down to

by male coworkers. According to Williams, women in STEM also express that they have to carefully monitor their interactions with others because they need to be very careful to appear competent without seeming bossy, something their male counterparts do not seem to worry about. Additionally, Williams acknowledges that men are not always aware that the women they work with have such anxieties. She suggests that the sexist tendencies of men in STEM are often "implicit biases, reflecting stereotypes people may not realize they have." Men may not always realize they are stereotyping women and treating them differently than one another. Yet this perpetuates the problem; subtle sexism is still sexism, and it still has a broad impact.

Prejudicial behavior and stereotyping are not limited to STEM occupations; seemingly harmless but actually sexist interactions occur everywhere. Bonnie Marcus examines sexism in more traditional office settings in her article "The Good, Bad and Ugly Ways Benevolent Sexism Plays Out in the Workplace." For instance, many women notice that they are asked far more often than men to plan events and parties for their office or department. Marcus writes, "The request is most likely grounded in the stereotype that women are better at planning and organizing, not leading," and that such requests contribute to a woman "being channeled into a support position." Marcus suggests that, although planning assignments intend to give credit to reliable workers, they may be harmful because they limit which skills and strengths women get to use in the workplace. In particular, Marcus notes, limiting women to such tasks maintains the idea that they cannot handle leadership positions. For men to overcome deeply-ingrained beliefs that women are not able to handle high-stakes responsibilities, women need to be given a chance to prove themselves.

The suggestion that society must change in order for women to access equal opportunities is not new. Virginia Woolf highlights the discrepancies between male and female life experiences in her essay “Professions for Women.” Woolf examines the effects of sexism within the field of literature and reflects on the ways in which it has harmed both her career and her sense of self. In “Professions for Women,” Woolf creates a humanized embodiment of sexism which she names “the Angel in the House” (418). The Angel in the House insists to Woolf that she must be gentle, unobtrusive, and pure. According to the Angle, difficult conversations “cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women; they must charm, they must conciliate…” (419). The Angel’s advice stems from the fact that society is quick to label a woman irrational and out of line if she is angry or critical. Men, on the other hand, are allowed to be argumentative. Woolf, however, will not passively accept this double standard. She will not listen to the Angel’s suggestions. She will not conform to society’s expectations of her. Woolf recalls that “whenever I felt the shadow of [the Angel’s] wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her” (419). Woolf’s active, vivid description of physically throwing the inkpot at the Angel reflects the difficulty of fighting sexism as a female writer. In her career, Woolf has to use her words, which are represented by the inkwell, to injure a misogynistic society, which the Angel in the House embodies. As a writer, Woolf refuses to be uncontroversial. She sets a strong precedent for female writers and working women to follow. It is important to note that Woolf’s call for gender equality occurred at a time when overt sexism was more acceptable and widespread than it is today. Woolf believes that she is in a place of relative privilege as a writer, yet she notes many hardships. She writes, “Outwardly, what could be simpler than to write

books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she still has many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome" (421). Woolf concedes that women making their way into other fields, such as law and medicine, deal with more opposition from the outside than she does in publishing. However, Woolf implies that, because women deal with sexism in daily interactions and are all but forced to internalize destructive messages, genuine equality has not been reached anywhere. No profession is actually easy or fully accessible for women, since none are immune to the influence of a stigmatizing and stereotyping society.

Woolf's ideas are applicable to modern women; the sexist messages Woolf had to battle in both her writing and her private life survive as today's underlying social norms. While great strides have been made towards gender equality since Woolf's time, the work is not done. In order for women to have a truly fair chance in America's workforce, men and women need to be treated equally and to feel like equals. We are all responsible for making our spaces open, accessible, and nondiscriminatory. Each choice we make contributes to a larger understanding of how men and women are expected to behave. If we teach women and girls, consciously or unconsciously, that they cannot do certain things and that they do not belong in certain places, it is only human nature that they will believe it. As a result, we need to make ti unacceptable to rehash those old sexist messages—and we need to go beyond that. We need to raise girls like Marcus and Williams who call out the double standards they notice in media, school, and work. We need to give them a voice. We cannot improve until we listen. As a man who likes to see myself as open-minded, it has taken me a long time to learn that

equality is multidimensional and complex, and that I need to hear out those who face stigmas I do not if I want to be a better ally.

We can never gauge with certainty the impact of our words. A teacher criticizing a girl for enjoying science classes may think what he's saying is acceptable, funny, or a bitter reality. That girl, though, may internalize the experience, and it may end up changing her whole outlook on school, her job prospects, and even her image of herself. On the other hand, if a female engineer or chemist were to share her success story at a school assembly, she might revive that student's hope again. The student already has the intelligence she needs to be successful. What's missing is the encouragement and compassion. She needs to know that her skills will be rewarded in the same way that her brother's would. We can build a society that treats girls like her fairly—one in which every girl and woman can be confident that her efforts will be seen, appreciated, and respected. Our culture offers the promise of equal opportunity; it's time to fulfill it.

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